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PROGRAM CBS Evening News

STATION WDVM TV
CBS Network

DATE June 27, 1985 7:00 PM CITY Washington, DC

SUBJECT Flight 847

DAN RATHER: CBS News Pentagon correspondent David Martin reports that TWA flight 847 may have been the hijackers' second choice, and the whole hijacking very easily might not have happened.

Also tonight he tells us why and how the takeover may have ignited a new feud among Lebanon's Shiite Moslems.

DAVID MARTIN: An Israeli el-Al airliner departing from Athens was the original target of the hijackers, according to one account obtained by US intelligence.

The account, which comes from a middle-ranking Amal official, does not explain why the hijackers switched from el-Al to TWA. According to this account, the hijacking was planned by the Beirut security chief of the radical Hezbollah faction, without the knowledge of Amal.

The Amal takeover of the hijacking in the early morning hours of June 15th was a tense and hostile affair. The takeover was not prearranged with Hezbollah, according to this account, and, in fact, there was fear of a gunfight. However, the hijackers agreed to take ten passengers off the plane as insurance and divide them between Hezbollah and Amal. None Amal militiamen then joined four Hezbollah gunmen for the flight to Algiers.

Amal now had Hezbollah outmanned and outgunned and was in control from then on. On Sunday, June 16th, when flight 847 returned to Beirut, Nabih Berri ordered the passengers off the plane, in part because movements of Hezbollah gunmen near the airport had raised fears the original hijackers would attempt to regain control of the plane.

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For the moment this must be considered raw intelligence, although the Amal official backed up his story with physical descriptions of the hostages.

If this account can be verified, one US official said, the Heboallah chief of security who planned the hijacking will become a likely target for retaliation.

David Martin, CBS News, the Pentagon.